

Profile: Labanya Margaret, Allowing Autonomy with Management that Empowers at the South Sudanese National Bureau of Statistics (Director General)¹

“Voice for the voiceless”

Labanya is the answer to a question I had in my work in South Sudan shortly after the first South Sudanese census came out – *“Why is this data so good?”* In my work, I often start by looking at official statistics – and when I go to investigate a problem (as an academic or in partnership with a Government looking to solve it), I usually find that the official statistics are somewhat, but not completely, accurate. But this was not the case in South Sudan – the data was *excellent* despite the country’s large size and newly independent status. I couldn’t imagine how this could have occurred. Then I met Labanya, and it all made perfect sense.

Labanya’s curiosity for the quantitative shape and description of her country is seemingly endless. Her voice rises and fills with energy as she asks “What is the current workforce of South Sudan? How many people are available? What are their grades? Their qualifications?” She adds “I naturally want to attach evidence to everything I do... I always take numbers of the people I meet.”

When she joined the public service South Sudan was a “baby country,” having just secured its independence after decades of civil war with Sudan. Labanya tried to help us understand how this moment felt. “My father fought all his youthful years. We were born when they were fighting the war. We grew up, the war was going on. Now they have called the war to an end and you’re seeing yourself being part of... a dream—2008 was seeing a dream come true. 2009 was working on that dream and vision.”

Labanya immediately accepted when offered the role of director general for the National Bureau of Statistics; it was “a grand opportunity to be part of setting up a statistical system and a statistical institution that would regenerate statistics for the whole country.” She joined because she believed the data she collected “will be used by not only the government, but the donors, and the whole world, to set a course for South Sudan.”

Even with Labanya’s passion and expertise, building up the National Bureau of Statistics in her new nation was no small feat. The first census in 2008 involved 11,000 data collectors. The country had no baseline data –almost all information was being collected for the very first time. It is hard to imagine a more difficult environment for monitoring performance, and thus for managing for compliance – how could Labanya know if her staff had collected accurate data, if there was nothing to compare it to?

There were also plenty of reasons the data might well prove difficult, if not impossible, to collect. South Sudan had very little infrastructure of any kind. Much of the population had fled the war as refugees and were in the process of returning. As Labanya puts it, “The country literally had no access. The roads were so bad, many of the places were inaccessible... the logistical challenges, the return of the people who were out of the country in order for the census to be implemented, and the funding issue” were major hurdles to the work.

Instead of being discouraged by these difficulties, Labanya saw them as exciting challenges which

offered connection to peers and purpose and helped her cultivate competence. Labanya was fortunate enough to experience empowerment-oriented management; her supervisors empowered her to exercise judgment and implement the solutions she thought were most effective. “I had two wonderful bosses. I’ll never forget them, and I thank them forever. They looked at me as part of this triangle, a triangle because the three of us had to work and really generate the momentum for the work to get done. They had the force to push you forward. You tumble, they lift you and get you through.” Her bosses were supportive peers, as much as they were supervisors.

As Director General of the Bureau, Labanya worked to create a sense of shared mission and collective commitment. Labanya was “loving and respecting” of her staff. She focused on “understand[ing] the interest of [her] team. Generate and connect with them. Allow them to explain their position to you.” She remembers, “whenever we went to the field, I made sure to place [the staff in my mind], to connect the face to the place where I saw him or her.”

Like her supervisors, Labanya placed great emphasis on living up to her commitments to staff – something is not always the case in places where employees have little recourse for mistreatment. “When you say you will pay them, you have to pay them on time: *‘We will pay you, and we’re going to pay you \$10. It’s \$10, not less.’*”

Labanya saw the census as a joint effort between the many members of her team and the population participating in the survey. “The numbers are telling exactly what [the people] are going through: the pain they are suffering, the joy, and their future visions.” She reminds us, “the data is not for the Bureau of Statistics. It is the voice of the voiceless. The population is the ones *saying* they did not eat... The health data *says* women are dying while delivering.” She wanted her staff “to know that whatever we had done was not our effort but the effort of a collective team and also their own, the people from whom we collected this information, so we constantly went back to thank them and to really recognize their contribution.”

During our interview, Labanya talked about those early days of independence as halcyon days – a relatively idyllic period despite the challenges, which has now come to an end. She explains, “the government realized that our numbers are going to hold them accountable. Numbers expose you. They expose your strengths and your weaknesses. They expose your ability to perform and not to perform.” Not everyone in the government wanted to be held to account.

Those with political power began to marginalize statistics. “[Political support] started pulling out of numbers and that’s how the Bureau of Statistics started suffering, moving away from being cared for - from the cradle of the government - to being cared for by the donors.” It was difficult for Labanya to witness this decline because she firmly believed that the conditions in her country can and must be improved; the numbers “are living things.” While “data can tell the sorrows, data can also give improvement.”

Labanya’s Bureau resisted the immense pressure they sometimes felt to alter or diminish the data. When asked what made her stand her ground and maintain the integrity of the statistics her team collected, Labanya is incredulous – the question nearly doesn’t make sense to her. “When you survey someone, you ask *‘What’s your name? When did you last eat?’* When the person tells you, *‘I last ate four days ago,’* Will you say no? Will you change it? You can’t! That is exactly what

we will record.” This is the passion, the sense of importance in her mission, that led the Bureau to South Sudan’s remarkable data success.

Sadly, however, the lack of support from the government eventually did undermine the Bureau. People who cared about the Bureau’s work had little support to achieve the agency’s mission, and funding cuts reduced salaries. This created a vicious cycle; “more and more personnel left the Bureau, they left with the knowledge, they left with the ability to do most of the work the Bureau was doing.” This hollowing out of the Bureau is a good reminder that Mission Driven Bureaucrats’ ability to have an impact through their work depends on their peers – once some Mission Driven peers leave, it is all the more likely that others will follow them, as their own ability to have the impact that motivates them is further diminished.

Watching this divestment of funds and support for the people of the bureaucracy informs Labanya's hopes for future reforms. “I think South Sudan, as a country, we need to move more on developing human capital... Capacity, training, more focus on the growth of the human than on the other [things]... train [the staff], make them understand and make them stand and make decisions.” She has the lived experience to back up these reforms; “You need to invest in the human capital on the capacity building, you need to invest in their motivation.”

Labanya holds tight to her belief in the power of numbers. She remains proud of the ability of data to bring transparency to the realities of her people, and wants to “create awareness on the benefit of using the numbers.” The potential to improve the lives of the population and to “plan for the next generation,” to prepare the future of her country, is an endless source of motivation for Labanya.

Her voice swells as she punctuates each word: “*Numbers. Change. People’s. Lives.*”

¹ Labanya is the only profiled individual we were unable to reach to confirm the details in their profile after it had been written. As such this account is drawn entirely from Sarah Thompson & my conversation with Labanya on November 17, 2020.